

Lady Be Good Montage in the success sequence

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The rapid montage sequence depicting and condensing a process of increasing success appears repeatedly in classical Hollywood films. As a recurrent element, it emerges frequently in biography pictures as a transitional device between early years of strife, hardship and preparation, and later years of a fully blossomed achievement. In such sequences we often see the meteoric rise of the athlete, gangster or entertainer moving from apprenticeship to national prominence, from family to the big time. Success montages often appear as elliptical condensations of group projects too. Thus the backstage musical commonly uses one type of success montage in depicting a condensed version of the opening night show and the audience's enthusiastic response.

Because it is such a widely used element of cinema, we were interested in closely examining a particular example — the composition of and rise to the top of the hit parade of the title song in the MGM musical *LADY BE GOOD* (Norman Z. McLeod, 1941). This sequence offers considerable development, and its length of about five and one-half minutes makes it one of the longest and most substantial success montages that we've seen.

We began studying the sequence on a horizontal editing table, which allowed us to observe the exact construction of the sequence. Some people might raise questions about this method of analysis, pointing out that by being able to examine the sequence frame by frame we have analyzed it in a totally different way than how it is actually perceived by audiences. True enough. We acknowledge the difference between an analytical reading and an experiential one. But we also want to argue that we are able to describe the film in a way that opens up a more accurate understanding of how the film presents material which is perceived and understood almost instantaneously. In addition, we are able to consider how the sequence was put together, and how the makers of *LADY BE GOOD* tried to present the intellectual idea of "success" and the abstract concept of mass culture popularity in the concrete form of a rapid succession of images and sounds. We want to present here some results of our more detailed analysis. We do not claim to be exhaustive, but we do feel we have observed the most significant elements of the

sequence in terms of what is conveyed and how it is presented.

The sequence can be loosely described in six parts, each of which shows one stage in the progress of song and songwriters: from creation to mass reproduction (printing), sheet music sales, song plugging, record sales, mass popularity, and triumphant success. A complete formal breakdown of the montage revealing all sound and image relations would be very long because of the density of the passage. Here we are presenting the results of our more detailed analysis in a digested format. We have segmented the sequence by major actions that convey a single concept or a related cluster of concepts.

To set the scene: Composer Eddie Crane (Robert Young) and lyricist Dixie Donegan (Ann Sothorn) have gradually become a successful popular songwriting team and also a married couple. They split up professionally and personally, but neither is successful or happy without the partnership. At the point the success sequence appears, about two-thirds of the way into the film, Eddie tries to make up with Dixie. He tries out a new tune on her and she begins to supply lyrics. Thus the song "Lady Be Good" is born. (We will not deal here with the "artistic creation" sequences in LADY BE GOOD. Suffice it to say this is the third time in the film Dixie and Eddie "spontaneously" compose together.)

We are starting the success sequence with Eddie's playing of the completed song. Throughout the next five minutes and 21 seconds the song continues, changing in arrangement, tempo, orchestration and vocals. It ends with Eddie and Dixie at a banquet in their honor given by other songwriters and music publishers. In addition to showing their success via "Lady Be Good," the sequence reestablishes their working relationship and brings their personal lives together.

CONNOTATION — — -TIME SEGMENT (min./sec.) — — -IMAGE CONTENT

PART ONE: FROM CREATION TO MASS REPRODUCTION

Connotations of working (artist and technician).

- 1: 0.00 Eddie starts playing the completed song; he hesitates at "misunderstood." They look at each other. Their separation has been a "misunderstanding." The glance unites them professionally and personally. [[see image](#)]
- 2: 0.22 In their publisher's office with Max (publisher) and Red (song plugger). Everyone beams. Max reaches for his cigar several times but is taken up with the music and stops the gesture. The song overwhelms automatic behavior; enchantment. [[see image](#)]
- 3: 0.38 Shifting glances; all look at Max who says, "We've got a hit on our hands." Handshakes. People in the music business "know" the commercial future of a song on hearing it. Once created the hit is recognized for what it is, not made into a hit.
- 4: 0.46 Max: "Get me an arranger." Music: violins connote speed, acceleration. A symbolic moment; next we see a door with the word "arranger" on it. The montage builds on generalization not specificity.

- 5: 0.49 Door: "Arranger." Iris out: hands on piano.
- 6: 0.54 Eddie and older man; smoking, shirtsleeves, trying major chord then minor chord then major chord. [[see image](#)]

Connotations of work.

- 7: 1.00 CU of handwritten song and hands; erasures, changes.

Mass production; technical work.

- 8: 1.07 Superimposition from 1.03 to 1.11; printing press, (stock footage) pulling a proof copy, correcting a proof copy by hand, a large press.

The sequence moves from *creation to mass reproduction. Sheet music is the initial and basic form a hit takes.*

- 9 1.12 Superimposition: printing press and "Lady Be Good" sheet music stacking up (pixillation).

PART TWO: SHEET MUSIC SALES

In many ways the next segment *conveys spontaneity as the sheet music increases in sales*. The segment details sheet music sales, building in a pattern of threes (two could be coincidence; three establishes a pattern). We see a piano playing "Lady Be Good" in a retail store, then "sales," and then a display case and money.

Declared a hit before public acceptance (self-fulfilling prophecy).

- 10: 1.15 CU sheet music cover and "New Hit" sign.

Connotations of eagerness.

- 11: 1.19 Retail store. Matronly pianist playing stride piano style. Background: young people buying sheet music.

A number of changes take place when we see other retail stores: the pianist becomes *more fashionable, the buyers older and more numerous (younger people are tastemakers, trendsetters)*, more sales people appear.

"Serious" music instruments are the background for sheet music passing from retail clerk to consumers.

- 12: 1.22 Display case with violin, horn, flute. Sheet music

passed across counter, waiting hands. No money is exchanged.

The fact of increased sales is shown; why and how this happened is not shown.

- 13: 1.25 Another store with a "Lady Be Good" wall display in the back, pianist, more people, more women customers, two women selling.
- 14: 1.31 Sheet music on display case without explanation disappears off the

case. Superimposition of coins falling downward in the frame.

- 15: 1.32 Sheet music all disappears. Coins fall in superimposition and pile up in the same plane as the top of the display case. [[see image](#)]

The process of exchange, the circulation of commodities, is shown by the juxtaposition of two things: sheet music disappears and coins begin piling up. Although actual exchange of goods and money is not shown, retail trade is not accurately depicted, some kind of a relation is established. Sheet music goes to "the public" (not really customers or consumers in the economic sense), and money arrives and increases.

Increase in numbers implies success. The success of the song links Eddie and Dixie in love and as public figures, celebrities.

- 16: 1.35 Third store. Two pianists, customers crowding the counter, in the background a display with Eddie and Dixie's picture in a heart and the words "Big Hit."
- 17: 1.38 Repetition of segment 14. Sheet music vanishes while money descends.
- 18: 1.43 Optical multiplication of hands playing piano; tempo of music increases.

The sheet music echoes the coins falling earlier, to some extent equating the two.

- 19: 1.50 Exterior, store display window with crowd looking in. "Sensational Hit." Pages of sheet music fall downward in the frame in superimposition. At first we thought paper money was falling in superimposition, but it was sheet music. [[see image](#)]

Sheet music sales appear to be a spontaneous activity — self generated and self propelled. Any rationality, order, decision making, planning, etc. in business is erased. The concept of "retail sales" disappears too. Instead, merchandise vanishes and money appears.

- 20: 1.54 Repetition of display case and disappearing sheet music with superimposition of a curtain of sheet music covers which rises. The segment depicting sheet music sales ends by continuing the "magical disappearance of sheet music.

PART THREE: SONG PLUGGING

The job often had associations of crassness, aggressive selling, and sometimes "deals," favors, payola, etc.

- The next segment uses a pattern of three to show song plugging. The job of the song plugger was to persuade performers to use new songs. Such performance stimulated sheet music sales. At the time, the song plugger was important in producing an initial momentum for the "hit."

Aggressive selling vs. indifference or disinterest.

- 21: 1.55 Red (Red Skelton) the song plugger in the offices of a distinguished older man makes extreme gestures of playing a violin while making nasal "violin" sound.

"LBG" reaches the audience for Boston Pops type performance.

- 22: 2.01 Man is shown as a conductor of an orchestra playing "Lady Be Good."

A simple transition device that reinforces the idea of performance affecting sheet music sales.

- 23: 2.07 Curtain of sheet music moves up; copies of LBG sheet music fall down through the frame.

Commonplace racist stereotyping: the musicians seem unimpressed.

- 24: 2.09 Red in a Chinese restaurant or club sings the song to some men in a mixture of pidgin English and "mispronounced" sing-song rhythm (with exaggerated gestures).

A gag, but is the joke on them or on Red? (and us?)

- 25 2.14 Same men in costume and with instruments. Singer sings in a foreign language — no apparent relation to the English version in music or vocals. [[see image](#)]

Sales are connoted.

- 26 2.20 Repeat of the sheet music curtain motif.

The strong implication that the particularly open mercenary activity of song plugging has no effect. A hit is not really sold, it is recognized.

- 27: 2.24 Red doing a pigeon-toed dance for the Berry Brothers (a stage dance trio who appeared earlier in the film) We are backstage with the Berry Brothers on and around large trunks and a Venus de Milo (*connotation — odd prop?*) As with the others Red songplugs, they seem disinterested. But in each case the song is used in performance.
- 28: 2.33 Red falls (*ineptness*).
- 29: 2.33 Berry Brother falls (skilled dance split).

The headline is inordinately large, which makes it easy to read, but which also grants the song a great importance. The song is now known by one word — Lady — which is the mark of success and fame (e.g., Ike, Prince, Barbra, Ali, etc.)

- 30: 2.41 Transition. Sheet music covers superimposed with *Variety*.
- 31: 2.42 *Variety* headline: "Lady" Promising. [[see image](#)]

PART FOUR: RECORD SALES

The scene is devised to connote "recording," not to actually describe the act.

- 32: 2.46 Superimposition. Sheet music curtain rises. Recording studio engineer twists knobs.
- 33: Recording studio, musicians.
- 34: Crooner friend of Dixie and Eddie — Buddy — making a record version of "LBG." Again, a very abstract and unrealistic scene — Buddy in a tux, one mike, musicians seen do not match instruments heard on soundtrack, etc.

Technical work; association with RCA Victor dog trademark; wishing for good luck.

- 35: 3.07 Eddie and Dixie watch the master record being cut with their fox terrier, Buttons. Dixie blows a kiss to the machine.
- 36: 3.16 Buttons and machine.
- 37: 3.20 Superimposition. CU of record being cut and completed records spinning upward. A rather dense set of superimpositions follows showing records being cut, records stacking up, records rolling. [[see image](#)]

Increase, multiplication, acceleration are used here, as earlier, to suggest quantitative success.

- 38: 3.27 *Variety* "Best Song Sellers" list appears; LBG is No. 15.
- 39: 3.30 New headline appears as record machine disappears.
- 40: 3.32 Superimposition continues: "'Lady' Sweeps Nation"; map of USA; large ocean waves. The montage becomes extremely literal (wave/ sweeps, map/nation).
- 41: 3.36 Superimposition, stacks of records grow upward.

Another pattern of three commences as record and performance are combined in three geographic areas.

- 42: 3.41 Camera moves in on California while superimposed records pass by.
- 43: 3.43 Lifeguard sings LBG to young women in swim suits. Another gag. Camera cranes up and back to reveal them under a beach umbrella in heavy rain.
- 44: 3.52 Superimposition. California beach; map of USA; ocean waves.
- 45: 3.55 Superimposition. Alabama on map; records pass through frame.
- 46: 3.56 Interior of Black club. Musicians, woman dancing in foreground. 47: 4.01 Map and moving records. New York.

Success in public recognition (in this case in cafe society). The success of LBG has brought them together in public places and in the public eye. Material success produces personal recognition.

- 48: 4.03 Iris out. Bandleader in night club cues spotlight to travel.
- 49: 4.04 As LBG is played, Dixie and Eddie are discovered by the spot at a

table; the room applauds them.

Validation by the authoritative newspaper on entertainment.

- 50: 4.14 *Variety*: "Lady Makes Good."
- 51: 4.15 LBG is now 11 in *Variety* chart.

PART FIVE: MASS POPULARITY

Another pattern of three commences as LBG climbs the chart: ordinary people begin singing the song in everyday situations and change the words, making it their own. Mass culture becomes validated as folk culture.

- 52: 4.16 Window washer sings LBG to a delighted Dixie. He is Italian (accent, cap, bandana, broad gestures) and changes the song lyrics to "bambina." [[see image](#)] At 4.20, LBG goes to 10, 9, on chart.
- 53: 4.24 Rag popping Black shoeshiner sings LBG substituting "hot potato" for "sweet and lovely."
- 54: 4.27 Camera tilts up to Eddie having his shoes shined and smiling. At 4.28, LBG moves up 8, 7, 6, 5.
- 55: 4.28 Manicurist sings LBG changing words to "dark and handsome."
- 56: 4.31 Camera movement reveals Dixie having her nails done. LBG goes to the top of the chart.

This sequence implies that a successful song goes all the way to the top when ordinary people take it up and make it their own. The hit parade is a measure of popular opinion, consciousness, activity. Interestingly enough, the previous indicators of commercial exchange are missing now. Although the chart indicates record sales, by being parallel cut with plain folks singing the song, it seems that it is more of a popularity poll. As people sing the song (not as they buy the records) it becomes number one.

PART SIX: PEER RECOGNITION AND TRIUMPHANT SUCCESS

After the two have achieved great success, peers give recognition.

- 57: 4.38 *Variety* announces Banquet for Eddie and Dixie.

First depiction of the radio in the sequence.

- 58: 4.41 Iris out. In a cab dressed up for the banquet, Eddie and Dixie seem extremely happy.
- 59: 4.46 Eddie turns on the vehicle's radio.
- 60: 4.47 He mimes the Lucky Strike tobacco auctioneer calling on the *Hit Parade* Program.
- 61: 4.49 Their song is again number one, for the 10th week.
- 62: 4.56 They feign boredom with success.

Radio seems to be the last medium for songs to catch up with the popularity of LBG: it responds to the groundswell of public activity (rather than itself shaping

taste and purchases).

In this segment the highest success combines (1) maximum quantitative success (record sales per week) with (2) public recognition by one's peers (the banquet).

- 63: 5.07 Eddie and Dixie exit from the cab. A brass band is playing LBG, flash bulbs go off (the press, news), many bystanders are held back by police (glamour, celebrity, etc.) The camera tilts up to a sign on the Hotel Whitney-Paige (WASP ethnicity) announcing a Testimonial Dinner.
- 64: 5.21 Dissolve through sign to Banquet with Max presiding. Song LBG down, applause of people at the banquet up. [[see image](#)]

After seeing the sequence, if we ask the question, "How does a song become a hit?" we find that it all seems to happen spontaneously. When created, a song either is a hit or it is not. After that, all that's needed is the exposure so that everyone (the publisher, the performers, the record companies, the public, radio) can share in that recognition of the hit's essence. This is, of course, a distortion of how the music industry actually operated in 1941. In fact it is so much of a distortion as to be completely fantastic and imaginary. We can see how the very simplified form of the Hollywood montage with its continual use of stereotypes, of univocal conventions, of simplified symbolism, meshes very well with producing a vastly simplified and simplistic understanding of the processes of mass culture.

We know that many techniques and examples of montage were brought to Hollywood in the Thirties by Slavko Vorkapich who had studied with Eisenstein and other Soviet filmmakers. Vorkapich worked on a number of montage sequences and gained such fame for them in Hollywood that "Vorkapich" became a slang term in the industry for any montage sequence. Unfortunately, we've been unable to find out very much about how such sequences were handled in Hollywood. Some studios had separate units just for such sequences, and young directors often started there, as did Don Siegel, for example. But there seems to be no article that discusses what specific methods were developed for the Hollywood montage and what the people making them thought about montage and how they compared their work with that of the Soviet filmmakers.

Other questions also come up. For example, how does rapid montage work? How do audiences understand it? How much information and what kind of visual and sound information can be conveyed? The answers to such questions may well come from work in perception and cognition and from studying the work of avant-garde filmmakers who have worked extensively with rapid montage. Short of launching such a full-scale investigation, it seems fair to say that in LADY BE GOOD we have a very watered-down version of montage, if we take Eisenstein as our standard reference point. In the hands of Arthur Freed's MGM musical unit, intellectual montage became what we would call "lobotomized montage."

